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ABSTRACT

A year-long qualitative and quantitative study examined closely the literacy experiences of kindergarten children to discover whether literacy was based on the tenets of a balanced approach or if it was a hodgepodge of eclectic experiences which occur with little apparent reason. Knowledge of the emergent literacy research also framed and shaped the study. Participants were two kindergarten teachers and their students in a Midwestern affluent suburban school district in a state that does not require students to attend kindergarten. Both teachers taught in the same school and planned together. The morning kindergarten class had 23 children with one special needs student, while the afternoon kindergarten class had 21 children. Data were collected from October 1997 through April 1998. Results showed that literacy practices in the two classes were similar but limited; read aloud, centers, opening activities, and journal writing were the four most common literacy practices children were engaged in. There was little or no regular modeling of literacy activity by the teacher. Findings suggest the need for continued education of kindergarten teachers in the research related to emergent literacy and developmentally appropriate practice. (Contains 22 references.) (NKA)

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PORTRAITS OF THE LITERACY PRACTICES IN TWO KINDERGARTEN CLASSROOMS: WHAT'S GOING ON

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PORTRAITS OF THE LITERACY PRACTICES IN TWO KINDERGARTEN CLASSROOMS: WHAT'S GOING ON

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During the past thirty years there have been dramatic shifts within the literacy community about what constitutes effective practice that supports the literacy development of students. The pendulum has swung from a direct instruction/basal reader orientation to a social constructivist/whole language orientation. Researchers at both ends of the spectrum have collected data from classrooms representing both basal and whole language approaches (Shake & Allington, 1985; Short, 1986) yet we seem no closer to answering the question as to which methodology is better or whether that is even a question worth pursuing. While the literacy academic community continues to struggle with this issue a new and more centrist view of literacy teaching and learning has emerged, the "balanced approach" (Au, Carroll, & Scheu, 1997; McIntyre & Pressley, 1996; Pearson, 1996) which advocates finding a common ground in the various approaches in which all educators can work. The researchers have been intrigued by how and what teachers are doing in classrooms. During the 1996-1997 year we did a year long study of literacy instruction in first grades. Our findings from that study, especially the dramatic differences between students' literacy achievement, raised questions as to the impact of kindergarten experience on these children. Believing that a closer examination of the literacy experiences of kindergarten children was warranted, a year long qualitative and quantitative study was undertaken. We were interested in discovering whether literacy was based on the tenets of basal reading experiences, on the tenets of whole language, on the tenets of a balanced approach or if it was a hodge-podge of eclectic experiences which occur with little apparent reason.

Knowledge of the emergent literacy research also framed and shaped our study of literacy activity in kindergarten. Emergent literacy has been defined as, "the reading and writing behaviors that precede and develop into conventional literacy" (Sulzby, 1989) and it is these behaviors which could be examined in a study of kindergarten students. The questions which guided the study included: What types of literacy experiences are children engaged in during kindergarten? What materials are used? What view of knowledge undergirds the type of instruction children receive and what are the implications of these practices? What literacy knowledge do children enter kindergarten with and how has that knowledge was used and expanded over the course of the school year?

Methods and Participants

The research design for the study draws from both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. The researchers chose to use a combination of methodologies because we believe that "what literacy research should be about is the clarification, creation, and application of knowledge about literacy" (Kamil, 1995, p. 258). By using the two methodologies in concert we believe we will be able to more fully describe and examine the many aspects of children's literacy within our study and document their impact on children's literacy.

The research project began with a pilot project in one first grade classroom in a school in a Mid-Western district. During the 1996-1997 school year our research team began to conduct research in first grade classrooms in two districts. While conducting our research in the first grades we realized how important it was to understand what literacy experiences children had in kindergarten and so revised our research plan. We negotiated entry into two half-day kindergarten classrooms for the 1997-1998 school year in one of the same Mid-Western districts.

Qualitative Methodology

Qualitative research methods were employed to develop thorough descriptions of the literacy activities children experienced in the two kindergarten classrooms. Comprehensive descriptions of the classroom environments were captured via fieldnotes and participant observation (Bogden & Biklen, 1982; Erickson, 1986; Spradley, 1979) on a weekly basis. Fieldnotes focused on the literacy activities which occurred in each classroom, the social contexts for literacy activity (such as small groups of children working with a teacher), the teacher's and children's roles, the instructional scaffolding provided, and the literacy materials utilized. Artifacts of teacher assignments and students' work were collected. Interview protocols were used to capture the perceptions, beliefs, language, and meanings attached to the language of the teachers and principal involved in the study. Audiotaping of interviews and subsequent transcription of all of the audiotapes occurred. Data analysis was on-going component throughout the study. It involved a systematic searching through and arrangement of concurrent pieces of data. Coding schemes were developed which revealed patterns across data sources. Triangulation of data sources (Mathison, 1988) and an audit analysis (Guba, 1981) were utilized to enhance reliability and validity.

Quantitative Methodology

Quantitative data was collected via several measures as a means of documenting the development of an array of children's literacy abilities. These assessments included: alphabet recognition, concepts of print (Clay, 1993), phonological awareness using a rhyme detection task (Brennan & Ireson, 1997), ability to read as documented via running records (Clay, 1993) writing development via the writing vocabulary observation instrument (Clay, 1993) and through writing sample collection and analysis. The title recognition test was also administered as a measure of children's exposure to books (Allen, Cipielewski & Stanovich, 1992)).

Additionally, the teachers were asked to rank order the children in their classes based upon their knowledge of the children's literacy abilities in both October and April.

Data Collection

Data were collected during the months of October, 1997 through April, 1998. One of the primary researchers and two graduate research assistants collected the qualitative research data while the quantitative data was collected by all members of the research team. On several occasions the primary researcher and a graduate research assistant were both present and collecting data simultaneously thus allowing further validation of our observations. Qualitative data was collected during one visit to each kindergarten classroom each week. The quantitative data was collected twice, once in October and again in April.

Participants and Background Information

The study involved two kindergarten teachers and their students in a Mid-Western affluent suburban school district in a state which does not require students to attend kindergarten (although most do attend). The school in which the study occurred drew from both middle and lower socioeconomic status families. The school population is predominantly Caucasian with a few minority families.

Both teachers taught in the same elementary school and planned together, providing us with a rare opportunity to examine how teachers "enact curriculum" (Eisner, 1985). The kindergarten experience in this school district is a half-day program; one of the kindergarten teachers taught the morning kindergarten class while the other kindergarten teacher taught the afternoon class.

There were 23 children in the morning kindergarten with one child identified as a special needs student who was part of the district's inclusion approach. The students were primarily Caucasian with one child who was African American. The afternoon kindergarten consisted of 21 children and was primarily Caucasian with 2 African Americans. Children in the morning kindergarten were from primarily middle socioeconomic status families while children in the afternoon kindergarten were primarily from lower socioeconomic status families. The difference in the socioeconomic status of the classes was a result of busing and the desire of parents in the community to have their children attend school in neighborhood groupings.

The school district had written and adopted an early childhood curriculum with a strong emphasis on developmentally appropriate instruction (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Bredekamp, 1987).

For the remainder of this paper the morning kindergarten teacher will be referred to as Mrs. Early and the afternoon kindergarten teacher as Mrs. Noon. Both teachers rely heavily on parent involvement and support to keep their daily

program working especially during Center time. Without parental involvement the Center time component did not work as well. Some parents also brought younger siblings into the classroom who often required much of the parents' attention. Both teachers shared the same physical classroom space and had equal access to texts, materials and supplies. The classroom space was large, well equipped and inviting. Central to the classroom design was a large proportion of space dedicated to centers and a large space which was used for whole class activities.

During the second semester of the school year a pull-out program for children who were characterized through testing and teacher prediction as being at risk for literacy development was initiated using state funds provided through Section 31-A. The instruction the children received was delivered by two paraprofessionals. There was little or no communication between the classroom teachers and the paraprofessionals except with respect to children's behavior. These children received instruction in letter recognition, beginning sounds, shared book experiences, rhyming and nursery rhymes, and writing. They were pulled out for twenty minutes three times per week. Five children in the morning and nine children in the afternoon kindergartens participated.

It is important to note that much of our interest in what occurred in the kindergartens in this school was a result of our work in first grade and as well as comments made by the school principal who believed we were overlooking a critical component of the school's literacy program by not examining kindergarten. Both the principal and the kindergarten teachers believed that their program was literacy rich and that their kindergartens were the most literacy rich in the school district.

Mrs. Early and the A.M. Kindergarten

Mrs. Early was identified as an "expert teacher" with a bachelor's degree in undergraduate early childhood and elementary education from a major university and a master's degree in early childhood and special education. She has been teaching for over twenty years teaching both in Head Start and in kindergarten in this district. Mrs. Early viewed herself as an "eclectic teacher" (Interview, 1998) who wanted "to instill in children a love of school, and that they feel comfortable and secure and happy in kindergarten" (Interview, 1998). She is a highly enthusiastic and energetic teacher who clearly loves children and kindergarten. Mrs. Early's time with students appears to be well planned and on almost all occasions materials are prepared ahead of time. Her classroom can be described as:

Active
Very Positive-lots of positive energy and feedback to children
Routine-based
Consistent management of children

Center driven instruction
Requiring little or no responsibility from children throughout the school day
Parents present 3 to 4 mornings per week

A typical morning schedule in her classroom follows.

8:45 -9:00	Students Arrive
9:00-9:50	Opening Activities and Journals
9:50-11:00	Centers and Snack
11:00-11:30	Special (art, physical education, music)
11:30-11:40	Read Aloud and Closing
11:40--11:45	Students Depart

Mrs. Noon and the P.M. Kindergarten

Mrs. Noon has a bachelor's degree in elementary education and a master's degree in reading from a local university. She has been teaching kindergarten for ten years in this district. Mrs. Noon spoke about how much her teaching had been influenced by the joint planning she does with Mrs. Early (Interview, 1998). Mrs. Noon's goal for her students was, "...that they come away from kindergarten loving school...and to enjoy being here" (Interview, 1998). She is also a very warm and caring person who clearly enjoys children. Her preparations for teaching did not seem to be as thorough as Mrs. Early's and she often had to interrupt her activities with children to look for things or prepare them. Her classroom can be described as:
Active
Positive
Routine-based, although routines were not as consistent
Inconsistent management
Center driven instruction
Little or no responsibility given to children throughout the school day
Parents present 1 to 2 days per week, although much more inconsistently than in the A. M. Class

A typical daily schedule follows.

12:45-1:00	Students Arrive
1:00-1:50	Opening Activities and Journals
1:50-3:00	Centers and Snack
3:00-3:30	Special (art, physical education, music)
3:30-3:40	Read Aloud and Closing
3:40-3:45	Students Depart

Literacy Activity in the Two Kindergartens

Engagement of students in literacy activity occurred primarily during the opening activities, during journal time, during read aloud, and during portions of center time. Each of these will be described.

The opening routine was a long and often drawn out affair during which the teachers and children went through a series of activities which often had different twists depending upon the day of the week. During opening the following activities typically occurred: attendance, calendar, spotlighted student of the week activities, star of the day activities, teacup reminder (attendance and snack choice), weather, joke of the day, and mathematics counting day activities. Embedded in several of these activities were literacy events. For example with the calendar the days of the week and the month were typically read by the star student and classmates. The attendance was conducted by a student who with the teacher's assistance read the names of his/her peers aloud as a meaning of checking who was or was not present. During the week a student was spotlighted and shared several special literacy activities which included: the sharing of a big book created by the child and his parents all about him/her, the child's name cheer and the secret sack activity. The secret sack was a bag in which the child and his parents placed an item that began with a specific consonant and then wrote three or four clues to the item. The child with the teacher's assistance would share the clues and the other children would guess the item based on the knowledge that it began with a designated consonant. The teacher and children would test the guesses to see if they began with the designated consonant or not. On another day the spotlighted student might have to "fish" for letters or words. The spotlighted student might also share his/her favorite book by reading it aloud or having the teacher read it. While a large amount of time was given to opening activities, only a few involved literacy and those that did primarily only engaged one child or a few children at a time.

Journal writing most frequently occurred during the period of time allotted to opening activities. It was characterized by each child having their own individual spiral notebook in which he/she was to draw and write, followed by a time when each child was to meet and share his/her message with the teacher. There was no modeling by the teachers of what to do during journal writing and the teachers did not maintain journals themselves. Typically children sat at any table they could find a seat at and then drew and wrote. There was little interaction during this time amongst children and journal time was very short (3 to 10 minutes). Occasionally during this time the teacher would sit beside a child and try to coach him/her to write. As children finished their writing, they went and stood in a line while they waited for their turn to meet with their teacher. The teacher would ask what a child had written and usually wrote down what the child said. The teacher would also use this time to try and coach the child to sound out one or more sounds in the words then he/she had been able to do alone. This coaching was also tied to goals for

writing the teachers had established and briefly explained to the children. A typical goal might be to have a beginning sound for each word and once this goal was achieved then a new one was set such as having a beginning and an ending sound for the word. Children often spent more time in line then they did writing and some children learned to avoid this experience by simply not getting in line and putting their journals away. As the year progressed parents often assumed this responsibility. Journal writing occurred every third to fourth day throughout the year, although it was extremely sporadic. Of note is the sense that the teachers thought they had journal time on a much more regular basis—nearly every day. This may indicate how easily we are lulled into mistaken beliefs.

Read aloud occurred every day and occasionally more than once per day. Read aloud was characterized by the teachers sharing a narrative regular sized trade book with children. The read alouds often included time for children to make predictions about what the book might be about and dialogue during the read aloud about vocabulary, expressions, or the children's predictions. Read aloud was a time when there was consistent engagement of most or all of the children.

Centers time involved many different activities which occurred simultaneously. Students were assigned to one of four centers each day and across a week should have participated in every center and had some free choice time. Typically the centers included mathematics, science, art and writing. Additional centers which were always available were free reading, blocks, sand table, and housekeeping and students often played in these when they completed their assigned center (reading was seldom chosen). Center time lasted an hour to an hour and fifteen minutes each day, although students often completed their center in fifteen to twenty minutes and then moved to one of the open activities. The writing center usually consisted of children completing a fill-in the blank statement such as "I am thankful for_____," and then drawing and/or coloring a picture. The teacher often stationed herself at this center. Parents assisted with centers when they were present. After centers were completed students usually had free time, although during one week children did participate in small group activities on rhyming and during the latter half of the year in an occasional guided reading lesson. Of note is that the the children who participated in guided reading lessons seemed to be those who chose to hang around the teacher at this time. All children did at one time or another participate, however, a child's personal interest was what really determined how often he/she participated. Occasionally the mathematics center would be turned into a game center where alphabet or word recognition bingo might occur. When children completed their centers they were free to do as they pleased for the rest of the time which usually meant they played with the blocks, at housekeeping and at the sand table.

Other activities which were rich with literacy activity occurred only a few times during the year such as a shared book experience and a dramatic reenactment

of the Three Little Pigs.

Results

Literacy practices in the two kindergarten classrooms were similar but limited. Read aloud, centers, opening activities and journal writing were the four most common literacy practices children were engaged in throughout the year. Except for read aloud and journal writing little if any regular in-depth student engagement in literacy occurred. Perhaps the classrooms could best be characterized as places where the teachers provided many situations in which students might explore literacy concepts but did not necessarily have to do so if they were not so inclined. Many of the common practices which the emergent literacy research suggests are critical for literacy development were missing. Throughout the year there was virtually no organized engagement of children in phonological awareness activities, little engagement of children in shared book activities, no engagement of children in interactive writing, no planned engagement of children in letter naming activities, no engagement of children in free choice independent or with a buddy reading time, and little or no dramatic play activities which utilized literacy props. There was little or no regular modeling of literacy activity by the teacher. Explicit whole group literacy instruction occurred sporadically and on very few occasions. Small group instruction rarely occurred thus affording students few if any opportunities to interact with the teacher and receive close instructional support in areas where their literacy abilities were developing. When individual children completed their journal entries they met with the teacher for coaching after they had completed their writings. This was the one activity that afforded children the opportunity to work within their zones of proximal development (Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1979) on a fairly regular basis. However, this coaching would have been more effective if it had occurred while children were writing rather than after the fact. Some children were highly frustrated with the post writing coaching and a few children began to avoid writing anything on their own until they met with the teacher because they knew they would have to change what they had written.

Our data analysis consistently revealed that time played a major factor in children's literacy development or lack of it. Large amounts of time each day were spent aimlessly by children especially during center time (as much as 30 to 45 minutes per day). Additionally the activities which characterized opening were extremely lengthy and given the fact that children became increasingly unengaged over the course of the year one wonders if this routine could not be shortened affording the teacher more time to engage children in more interactive and diverse literacy activities.

Our qualitative and quantitative data documents the fact that both kindergarten classes are comprised of students with a wide array of literacy strengths

and needs. An awareness of the population of the community the school draws from supported our belief that the students in these kindergartens come from homes which represent a wide range of socio-economic statuses. Some children were identified in the fall of the school year through our quantitative testing to be at risk for literacy development. The instructional program provided little support for their development of phonological awareness, alphabet recognition, concepts of print, interest in books, etc. Some of these children participated in the state funded pull-out program funded by Section 31 A during the second half of the year, however they received support from paraprofessionals with very limited knowledge of literacy. As the research of Allington & McGill-Franzen (1989) demonstrated the neediest children are receiving instruction from the least qualified personnel. And this program did not service all the children who might have benefited from it.

Our quantitative data suggests that students who entered school with the lowest literacy achievement made some of the greatest gains, perhaps because they had a larger deficit to overcome. The students scoring highest sometimes did not make large gains probably due to ceiling effects. The students in the middle group seem to have made relatively smaller gains. Our qualitative data suggests that literacy instruction is consistently directed at students who come to school with already well developed literacy skills/experiences and are primarily from higher socio-economic status backgrounds, while students with less developed literacy skills/experiences from primarily lower socio-economic status backgrounds received little teacher-directed instructional support which would facilitate their literacy development. As a result the differences between "high" and "low" students continue to grow more pronounced. These findings help to explain the 'rich get richer and the poor get poorer' Matthew Effects discussed by Stanovich (1986).

Our interview data and observations in the classrooms revealed a quite surprising trend. The two kindergarten teachers in the study hold a strong theoretical orientation towards developmentally appropriate instruction as espoused by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Bredekamp, 1987). This theoretical orientation shapes and guides the daily activity and literacy practices which predominate in their classrooms and may explain the lack of literacy activity which occurred. Additionally their stance towards developmentally appropriate activity is held and espoused by their school district for students in all primary classrooms.

Impact

The findings of our research has implications for the educational community at large. Our research presents a portrait of what's happening in two kindergarten classrooms and how the instructional choices teachers make each day impact

children's literacy development. It seems that the traditional view of kindergarten as a " children's garden" (Froebel, 1974) is one that still exists in these classrooms. It also suggests that the more capable students have greater opportunity to expand their literacy knowledge base/skills while the less capable students have less opportunity to develop and expand their literacy knowledge base/skills. Our research suggests that a conflict may exist between the theoretical ideas which support a developmentally appropriate orientation and the emerging literacy research and orientation. Teachers who were trained in and are currently grounded in a developmentally appropriate orientation may believe that children will learn literacy skills when they are ready. They may view kindergarten as primarily a socialization and experiential event which does not need to provide young children with opportunities to participate in rich literacy experiences which support their development, whereas, the emerging literacy research suggests that young children should be actively engaged in a variety of literacy activities which will support their development from their earliest years.We believe this focus can in part be traced to the body of literature on developmentally appropriate practices (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Bredekamp. 1987) and the book Kindergarten Policies: What Is Best For Children? (Peck, McCaig, Sapp, 1988). Many of the ideas espoused in these books are indeed excellent and important for the education of young children, but in fact topics not fully addressed in these books tend to be just as important and emergent literacy is one of these areas. The lack of a thorough focus on this topic sends a message to the reader (who is often a teacher) that emergent literacy is not that important in the young child's development. We do not want to suggest that young children should be engaged in non-active paper and pencil tasks, however, we do want to suggest that many rich and varied activities which support literacy development are crucial and a necessary component of developmentally appropriate practice for young children. We believe that it is time for the people involved in the National Association for the Education of Young Children and literacy focused organizations such as the International Reading Association to begin to work more collaboratively across existing organizational and educational boundaries. Our beliefs were just affirmed by the just released joint position statement from the National Association for the Education of Young Children and the International Reading Association (International Reading Association, 1998; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998) which expounds on what developmentally appropriate practices for the literacy development of young children should include. However, we do not believe that a position statement is enough, people in both organizations and research communities need to find other ways of communicating our understandings to teachers in the preschool and primary grades. Our findings are also affirmed by the research of McGill-Franzen (1992) who found that developmental appropriateness is often a like a trap for lower socioeconomic children who need opportunities to explore and

develop knowledge of literary concepts and written language.

Our research further suggests the need for the continued education of kindergarten teachers in the body of research related to emergent literacy and methodologies which are compatible with tenets of developmentally appropriate practice such as the need for active engagement in learning. Programs which provide teachers with in-service opportunities may help meet this need. For example, Kirby describes such a program for kindergarten teachers which focused on authentic reading experiences (1992).

Our research suggests the need for a more expansive look at kindergartens to see if this is a major factor in literacy development. We no longer live in an era where kindergarten is the first socialization and schooling experience many children have. We live in an era where we know that good first teaching is the best solution for all children whether they are in kindergarten, preschool or the primary grades. A good start in literacy is likely to pave the way to a better and brighter future for all children.

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